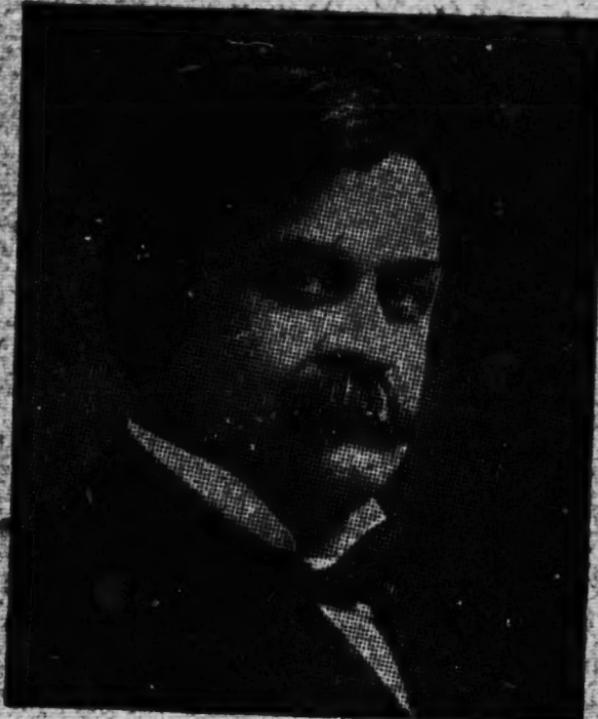


WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF HIS COMING?



BY

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Published by E. O. Weber, 163 King St. W.
Berlin, Ontario

What are the Signs of His Coming?

Humanity has just completed the circle of the earth—and there is one book which has travelled with humanity well-nigh all the way—that book wears the garland of prophecy. Exception is the crown of scripture. Westward the course of empire takes its way, from the valley of the Euphrates, from the valley of the Nile, through the eccentric valley of the Jordan, through the Isles of Greece, around the mountain ranges of Europe, across the trackless ocean, and from Plymouth Rock to the Golden Gate, and the Bible is the only book, which, beginning with humanity, and descending upon the sloping hills of the farthest western boundary, lifts the prophetic torch of revelation and flashes forth the wonderful picture of a Holy City—the New Jerusalem—coming down from God out of heaven.

The Bible has produced the civilization which crowns it, and crowns the civilization which it has produced. Its prophetic centre is a city—its prophetic ideals, a citizen, and its prophetic consummation—a civilization. The spirit of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. The Alpha and the Omega of humanity's emancipation is breathed out in that supreme name—EMMANUEL. In this sacred volume men believe that they have discovered the program of the ages. The last scene portrayed by the hand of inspiration is—a great prophet standing on a lonely island, in mid-ocean, scanning the ages.

The warp and woof of history and prophecy, pierced by the ever recurring shuttle of incident and accident, brings forth a fabric fascinating in its design

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and beautiful in the radiant folds of
shotted silk.

History is climacteric in its evolution. The development of the divine plan is like the growth of the century plant—long, long years of waiting and then the sudden burst and full bloom—the consummation of a hundred years! The last four centuries of human history have been glorious. Each century provides a peak from which we may review the past or anticipate the future. The printing press of the fifteenth century, the steam engine of the eighteenth century, the electric achievements of the nineteenth century, and the commercial combinations of the twentieth century have furnished a foundation of reinforced concrete for the world-possibilities of the twenty-first century.

We should seek to know the outlines of prophecy and the trend of history. The study of prophecy is only dangerous when students mistake specks for pebbles and boulders for mountain ranges. God has taken us into His confidence—to a degree. He has indicated certain broad outlines. We may know “which way” even though we cannot indicate the exact day. Let us not be blind in an hour when history is being made, or else we may be so unworthy as to be classed with those citizens of fair France who resided in certain parts of Paris during the French Revolution and the “reign of terror” (of which Thomas Carlyle writes so eloquently), and yet never knew that anything of unusual importance had come to pass in the world.

We are not dealing in the narrow phraseology of a rejected system of Biblical interpretation when we assert that all scripture can be spelled out in three brief sentences: “He is coming

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again!" All scripture can be consistently grouped about these three affirmations.

Let me call your attention to a fact for which we can find no adequate human explanation, namely, the Jewish tradition of a coming Messiah. For four thousand years Israel—in person, family, tribe, people and nation—lived in the light of a coming event. That coming event cast its glory before. From Enoch to Elijah and from Isaiah to Malachi, Jewish prophets all sound the same high note of national anticipation: "Behold He cometh! Behold He cometh!" Type and symbol, prophecy and history, literature and law, all point to the coming King.

New Testament writers con the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures for hints and suggestions of the coming conqueror and with a childlike confidence mark the fulfilment of certain details which would otherwise pass unnoticed by the careless reader. There are at least two score of particulars and details recalled and made the subject of a devout reference: The coming Messiah is to be born of a virgin—Bethlehem is to be his birthplace—he is to spend his infancy in Egypt—he is to be betrayed by a friend—he is to be forsaken by his disciples—he is to be sold for thirty pieces of silver—he is to be buried in a potters' field—he is to be spat upon and scourged—his hands and feet are to be pierced—not a bone of his body is to be broken. There are at least thirty of these strange and weird predictions, and the penman of New Testament literature seems to find in them certain premonitions and forebodings of the coming hero who should bring to Israel a longed-for consummation, and, measuring up to the broad out-

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lines of a universal need, prove to be, "the desire of all nations."

No careful student of biblical history would, I take it, care to deny that such a tradition dominated the political cogitations of the patriotic Jew and that such an element of national anticipation, not only influenced the conduct of certain loyal individuals, but became the favorite song of the seer, the watchword of the far-seeing Jewish statesman and the natural climax of almost every genuine outburst of Hebrew eloquence. John was in the line of a long succession when he exclaimed: "There cometh one, after me, mightier than I."

I venture, however, to call your attention to a fact, which no student of early Christianity or intervening church history can very well ignore, namely, that for almost two thousand years, another strange tradition, similar in its effect and influence, has possessed the hearts of thousands of devout Christians, and, at times, strongly influenced the spiritual life of the church. The tradition concerning the possibility of the return of Jesus Christ to this planet, parallels, in its power of persistency and in its fascinating influence on the minds of earnest Christians in all lands, the former traditions, which sustained the heart of the Hebrew during long years of political failure, humiliation and national dishonor. And while the fact of an historical analogy does not furnish the basis for a logical inference which is absolutely unanswerable, yet, we submit, that to the candid student of Scripture, with the New Testament open before him, and the last message of the lonely prophet of Patmos sounding in his ears—"Behold He cometh!"—the wonderful similarity of the two traditions, in

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origin, development and influence, is not without significance for every man who believes that the incidents of our individual experience and the events of national and international affairs are both the subject of a divine consideration and providential supervision.

Of course no unprejudiced reader of the New Testament would dispute the statement that the believer in the later tradition finds ample grounds for the justification of his position, in the repeated reference to the possibility of such an event in the literature of the early church. The pages of the New Testament are simply alive with the glory of a coming consummation. I could reject the orthodox claims for the supernatural origin of Christianity, easier, than I could close my eyes to the fact that the writers of New Testament literature were inspired by one, common, universal hope, which centered in the personal return of their Lord to the earth. Right or wrong, inspired by a proper interpretation of the words of their Lord, or swept from the anchorage of sound reasoning and sane thinking by a new religion—the apostolic writers affirm and reaffirm their faith in the Second Tradition.

The thought simply dominates the early literature of the church. No doctrine is more prominent in the New Testament. "Yet a little while and He that cometh, will come, and will not tarry"—"Behold I come quickly!" "Amen! Even so come, Lord Jesus!" They expected his immediate return to the earth and died in the hope of that expectation.

In view of the fact that the most remarkable religious revolution in the history of the world was inspired by a hope

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which, seemingly, finds no fulfilment after two millenniums of patient waiting, we naturally ask ourselves the question, "Did he not come in some unexpected way?" For instance, may not the dawning of the Day of Pentecost have been the fulfilment of the Master's prediction, or the strange and unlooked for conversion of Saul, or that unparalleled event in Jewish history—the destruction of Jerusalem! but John on the Isle of Patmos, in the year A.D. 96, after all these events had occurred exclaimed: "Behold He cometh!"

Were the Christians of the first century mistaken, then, in their fond expectation that Jesus would return to the earth? Nay! Nay! In all these centuries there have been signs of the King's coming. Paul's expectations have been more than realized. Everything has passed beyond the apostle's dream. The empire of Rome has passed away and destiny has provided a new empire, a new race, a new civilization, and a new world. Slavery has disappeared, ecclesiastical despotism has been dethroned, labor has been sanctified, womanhood has been emancipated, childhood has been glorified and Christian ideals have been well-nigh enthroned in the leading nations of the earth.

Great Britain is greater than the Empire of Rome in the hour of its brightest grandeur. The Anglo-Saxon race is reaching out a mighty hand in kindly legislation for a whole world; while America has provided the virgin soil necessary for the great experiments in democracy and brotherhood which shall, please God, usher in the golden age of prophecy, and grant for the hungry eye of men and angels a new heaven and a

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new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.

Meanwhile, we lean on the unbroken promises of Jesus. His word has never failed. He said the temple would be destroyed—it was. He said He would be crucified—He was. He said He would rise again—He did. He said that He would ascend—and a cloud received Him out of their sight. He said He would send a blessed messenger, even the Holy Spirit and the church was born amid a whirlwind of spiritual power. He said, “I will come again”—and I find nothing in science, scripture or common sense, which leads me to believe that He is not able to keep His word. And so I join with those who sing—

Down life's dark vale we wander,

Till Jesus comes;

We watch, and wait, and wonder,

Till Jesus comes.

Oh, let the lamp be burning,

When Jesus comes;

All joy His loved ones bringing—

When Jesus comes;

All praise through heaven ringing,

—When Jesus comes.

All beauty bright and vernal—

When Jesus comes.

All glory, grand, eternal—

When Jesus comes.

This evening we turn to that wonderful chapter, the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew—where we find the record of a private conversation between Christ and his chosen ones, and listen with peculiar interest to that searching question, which loses nothing of its force and fascination with the passing of the years: “Tell us—what shall be the sign

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of Thy coming and of the end of the age?"

And we note two facts. Two facts which stand in a suggestive contrast, and which must be weighed in the mental balances of a sound judgment, if we would grasp the meaning of Christ's answer. First, the disciples were anxious to know when He would return. We must breathe into their question the anxiety of love and the concern of a personal regard. They are to be separated from Him. When will that separation cease?

The consideration of a universal kingdom pale into a lessening significance, while they contemplate and seek to anticipate the hour of his personal return and the glory of it. The question is asked with the tender impatience of love—“Tell us”—“Tell us plainly”—“Tell us what shall be the sign!”—“Tell us when the hour shall strike!”—“Tell us!”

Christ's answer furnishes us with the second fact in the contrast. He was anxious that they should understand the nature and character of the intervening events which should transpire during his absence. Jesus grasped the thought of the ages. He grasped the ages in His thought. As the world's greatest prophet, He placed all the emphasis of the closing hours of His earthly ministry on the universal changes which should take place before His return. By a careful study of the pages of the Old Testament Jesus had discovered “the program of the ages.” We know this, because the very words used by Jesus in making His predictions, and fondly quoted by His disciples in after days, are borrowed almost in their original form and setting, from the eloquent utterances o

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Jewish prophets and orators. He indicates and acknowledges the source of His knowledge and the secret of His inspiration when He flings out the scholarly challenge: "Search the Scriptures."

A study of the whole field of Hebrew prophecy—its sweep, trend and tendency, indicates that there are to be certain great world movements. These world movements engaged the thought of Jesus and were the subject and theme of the closing moments of His life. He is thinking of world movements when He exclaims: "For as the lightning cometh out of the east and shineth even unto the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be." How shall we best describe these great world epochs, outlined by the ancient prophets of Israel, and in process of development at the present time?

First, we have hints and suggestions of a period of universal knowledge. "The gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations and then shall the end come." Commercial facilities for a universal communication and international intercourse seems to be lingering in the minds of the prophet Daniel when he records the prediction: "Many shall run to and fro and knowledge shall be increased." This brief paragraph, it seems to us, accurately describes the commercial and intellectual tendencies of the present generation. "Seeing the world" is the science of the modern pleasure seeker and the "globe trotter" is omnipresent in every land. A review of the events of the world's history for the past twenty-four hours is laid on our breakfast table every morning, and knowledge in printed form may be found arranged in attractive pyramids at the

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news-stand of every railroad station of any commercial importance.

Second, there seems to have slumbered in the minds of the Hebrew prophets and universal upheavals in the social, political, intellectual and spiritual realms. In the rich, metaphorical language of oriental expression, these predictions are alike startling to the mind and fascinating to the imagination. With what linguistic precision they touch every realm of thought and action. (1) "The sun shall be darkened"—an expression which seems to hint at great changes in the arena of political affairs and international relationships. (2) "The moon shall not give her light"—a veiled suggestion of important revolutions in human thought as touching the realm of social distinctions and class divisions. (3) "The stars shall fall from heaven"—great readjustments in human ideals; a new conception of old principles which have been regarded as the "fixed stars" of human thought. Great reconstructions in doctrine, principles and, so-called, fundamental truths. (4) "And the powers of the heavens shall be shaken"—such vast changes in the religious thinking of mankind as shall indicate disturbances of the most vital character with reference to the recognized seat of authority in spiritual things. All these peculiar phrases indicate change, turmoil, trouble, unrest, upheaval and revolution. The sky of history black with the storm driven clouds of unlooked for events—"Behold, He cometh with clouds!" There are to be great revolutions in every realm of human achievement, but all these changes whether mental, social, political, ecclesiastical or international, will tend to

ward the unity of the nations and the solidarity of the race.

Third, there is also the prophecy of the dawn and supremacy of a universal democracy. "Then shall appear the sign of the son of man in heaven"—"I will make a man more precious than fine gold" Democracy, Socialism, Brotherhood--these are the watch words of the present hour; and they are but the echo of a revolution, scarcely a century old, which carved on its newly erected pillars of granite the words, "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity." The nations are rising in the strength of a dawning conviction that humanity must wield the sceptre of sovereignty. National consciousness is but international consciousness in the germ. The earth is the Lord's and the fruit thereof the heritage of all the children of men. Humanity has, at last, discovered itself! That was a searching question asked by Theodore Parker concerning Goethe: "What did he ever do for humanity?"

Fourth, there are repeated suggestions and reiterated predictions of the end of war and the inauguration of universal peace. "Nations shall learn war no more"—"There shall be war and rumors of war but the end is not yet"—Not until humanity is through with wholesale carnage and cruelty will the climaxes of history begin to break in planetary music on the harp of destiny. This is the vision of our seers and prophets to-day, and Tennyson has given articulation to the dreamer's vision in those oft-quoted words:

"I look into the future, far as human eye can see,
Caught a vision of the world and the glory that shall be

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When the war drums throb no longer
and the battle flags are furled,
In the parliament of man, the federa-
tion of the world."

We reach the main thought of our discourse and the heart of our subject, when we affirm that Bible students will never understand prophecy until they learn to distinguish the difference between the coming of the Kingdom and the coming of the King. The coming of the Kingdom will be gradual, but the coming of the King will be sudden.

The greatest prophecy in scripture is expressed in these words: "In the days of those kings shall the God of Heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, it shall stand forever." Every event in history brings us nearer to the fulfilment of that prophecy. The timepiece of the Eternal has decades for "seconds," centuries for "minutes" and millenniums for "hours." It required four centuries of martyrdom to establish Christianity on the earth. Nearer and nearer to the divine consummation, the race moves onward—ever onward toward "that one far-off divine event toward which the whole creation moves." In the log book of Columbus, again and again, do we find the prophetic words: "This day we sailed westward." To ward a higher destiny we move as we sing with Whittier:

"I feel the earth move sunward
I join the great march onward."

To every child of the King is given the divine guarantee of an ultimate victory. "For as much as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord

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Sure of victory we press onward, inspired by an unwavering courage. Victory! Some day the last enemy will be slain! Some day the last tyrant will be dethroned! Some day the last den of debauchery will be extinguished! Some day the last grave will be dug! Some day the last funeral procession will pass by and be gone forever! Some day the last sigh will be transformed into a shout of victory, and the last shadow lost in the brightness of an eternal dawning! Victory! Victory! Victory!

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne,
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And behind that dim unknown,
Standeth God, within the shadow,
Keeping watch above His own.

Aye, and ever and anon, we catch a glimpse of the rosy-hued fingers of destiny unlocking the gates of history—the mountain tops aglow with morning light! There are ages which are golden. There are centuries which are epochal. There are decades which seem to focalize a thousand years of toil and tears. There are pivotal points in history. Such was the Incarnation, such the Great Reformation, such the French Revolution, such the rise of a new world democracy, and, such the present hour, when nations are being reborn, and civilizations beginning to put on the bridal garments of Righteousness and Truth. Are we approaching a new pivotal point in the world's history? Remember the words of Goldwin Smith: "The stream of history is drawing near to a cataract." Recall the prophetic words of Disraeli: "The great crisis of the world is nearer than some suppose." Is God preparing

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the world for some great universal movement? Oh, Christian, study the march of events!

"We are living, we are dwelling
In a grand and awful time;
In an age on ages telling;
To be living is sublime."

Fools talk about "the end of the world!" In the divine economy every end is a beginning and every beginning an end. Ages end, but the earth stands sure. This old weather-beaten planet will last till God gets through with it. The heavens will not "depart as a scroll when it is rolled together" until the program of history is complete. A material universe which has occupied millions of years in its construction will not be blown up in a night. Every earthquake means that the planet is firmer and more compact. Ages may come to an end, empires fail and republics crumble, but this old sun-kissed, storm-tossed earth will stand till humanity has enacted the last event in the program of destiny.

The coming of the Kingdom will be gradual, but the coming of the King will be sudden. "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord, so cometh, as a thief in the night." "As a snare shall that day come on all that dwell on the face of the whole earth." That will be the world's greatest surprise! When shall it be? Cromwell thought that Christ would come in his day. Luther, imagined, four hundred years ago, that one hundred years would finish human history, and usher in the King.

Students of prophecy have been prone to focalize on certain dates, and have

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more than once startled the world by their predictions. December 31st, in the year A.D. 1000 was fixed upon as the end of all earthly things. Believers looked for the "end of the world," "the day of judgment," "the resurrection of the dead," and "the coming of the Lord." The whole world came to a standstill. Humanity held its breath—until the sunrise of the first day of a new century indicated that the machinery of the world was not to be disturbed.

I have but two questions to ask, First. Can He come? Second, Will He come?

Can He come? He can, if He still possesses His ascension body! What became of the body of Jesus, the aeroplane of His spirit? With that body He left us, and with that body He may return. He took His body. He left His blood. Should He return in bodily presence to the world, He would fulfil a most remarkable prophecy: "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven."

But will He come? In strict confidence, He has never been far away. He has lingered so near the earth that He has been seen again and again. Scores of saints in all the Christian centuries have affirmed, "I have seen Him! I have seen Him!" Stephen, in the hour of his martyrdom, exclaimed: "I see Jesus standing at the right hand of God." Charles G. Finney saw Him in his lonely New England law office at the vesper hour on a business day, and never forgot the glory of the vision. Oh, happy soul who can exclaim: "I have seen Him! I have seen Him!"

* * *

May it not be that the unlocking of

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the secrets of nature by the hands of Science—the effect of the truth on the mind of man by the operation of the Holy Spirit—and the gradual refinement of the nature of man by the spiritualizing power of thought, working in harmony with the successive events of human history, will remove the veil and reveal an ascended Christ, perfect in human form and "in like manner" as He left the earth!

Robert Murray McCheyne, surrounded by a circle of devout believers, turned earnestly to the first and asked the startling question: "Do you think He will come to-night?" "I think not," said the one addressed. To the next friend he addressed a like question: "Do you think He will come this week?" "I think not," was the answer. Turning to the next communicant, he inquired: "Do you think He will come this month?" "I think not," was the response. And, then turning to the most venerable Christian in the group, he inquired: "Do you think He will come this year?" "I think not," was the grave reply, and then, with the splendor of a peculiar hope shining in his deep eyes, the Scotch divine quietly closed the devout discussion by remarking "In such an hour as ye think not, the Son of Man cometh."



